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## Hearing Competing Voices in James Robertson's *The Fanatic*

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## HEARING COMPETING VOICES IN JAMES ROBERTSON'S *THE FANATIC*

*Alison Jack*

In his Introduction to his co-edited volume, *Literature and the Scottish Reformation*, Crawford Gribben quotes Patrick Collinson's view that "the Reformation was awash with words" and agrees with him that in Scotland these words offered an "immense creative as well as disruptive influence."<sup>1</sup> This reappraisal of the literary creativity generated by the Reformation in Scotland forms, for Gribben, part of the "re-revision" of the relationship between literature and Calvinism needed in the study of Scottish literature. Gribben and Mullan's volume offers a range of perspectives which seek to do just that with regard to texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The awashness of later Scottish literary texts with creative and disruptive intertextual words is a more recognised feature, particularly in the field of Gothic literature. But the relationship between intertextuality, writing and religion is less commonly discussed. In this short paper, I will consider critical responses to James Robertson's novels *The Fanatic* (2000) and *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), with particular reference to the character of John Lauder in *The Fanatic*. While most critical attention has been paid to the political and psychological aspects of such characters in *The Fanatic* as James Mitchel and Andrew Carlin, I will argue that the religious perspective of Lauder is presented as offering a creative alternative relevant to both worlds of the novel.

Robertson's novels, *The Fanatic* and *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, are often discussed in the scholarly context of contemporary Scottish Gothic. In Timothy C. Baker's *Contemporary Scottish Gothic*, both

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003), 27, 87, quoted by Crawford Gribben, "Introduction," in *Literature and the Scottish Reformation*, ed. Crawford Gribben and David George Mullan (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1-20 (6).

novels are offered as examples of such texts in which reference to texts from the past, particularly "canonical" Gothic works such as Hogg's *Confessions* and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*, both assert and distort an understanding of the self, the nation and the relationship between the two. In its dependence on intertextual references, Gothic makes explicit that which is unspeakable, the very impossibility both of representing the past in the present, and of escaping that same past in present times. This is foregrounded in the Gothic questioning of the "notion of a stable narrative stance or even a stable notion of self" which Baker suggests Robertson explores through the "liminality and sense of constant movement between fiction and reality" in *The Fanatic* and *Gideon Mack*.<sup>2</sup> This, for Baker, is a literary manoeuvre Robertson shares with Walter Scott.

In *The Fanatic*, Baker argues, the interweaving of the legends of Major Weir and James Mitchel with the life of Andrew Carlin forces the reader to confront issues about the reliability of any understanding of history. As Carlin's confusion and uncertainty about what he may know about Weir or Mitchel grows, the political context he finds himself in becomes more dominant. For Baker, the Scottish nation on the brink of devolution is presented, like Carlin, as an entity haunted by the past and confused by the present. However, "what keeps this from being a simple allegory... wherein Carlin's experiences may be seen to represent Scotland's inability to confront its own history of religious extremism, is Robertson's focus on the way the past is accessed through texts and, correspondingly, on its destructive power" (Baker, 39). The contested status of the mysterious manuscript, *Ane Secret Book*, is one focus for the unreliable textuality of the past. The introduction of the omniscient narrator in the novel's epilogue further highlights the unreliability of what has been read but suggests that reading and experience are still needed to understand the present so moulded by the past, for communities and individuals. For Baker, the influence of textuality on self-understanding goes beyond issues of religion.

The religious aspect of Robertson's work is also sidelined somewhat in Baker's reflection on *Gideon Mack*, which he reads as a "larger interrogation of literary tradition, as well as a continuation of Robertson's interest in the interrelation of self and text" (Baker, 41). This is in contrast to a reading of the novel which focuses on its deliberately

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy C. Baker, *Contemporary Scottish Gothic: Mourning, Authenticity, and Tradition* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 31.

superficial use of allusions to earlier Scottish literary texts: self-reflexivity replaces the certainty of religious belief in this view, “intertextuality provid[ing] a sense of ‘otherness’ that would have previously been found in religion or superstition” (*ibid.*). While Baker comments that the novel could be read as “an investigation into the nature of received religion” (Baker, 42), he offers instead a reading of the influence of Sir Walter Scott on the text and on Gideon Mack in particular which challenges all notions of the stability of the self. As he asserts, “Gideon Mack inhabits a world which is not so much ‘God-haunted’ as ‘Scott-haunted’” (Baker, 43).

In *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Alison Milbank offers a discussion of the relationship between Scottish Gothic literature and the pervasive influence of Calvinism.<sup>3</sup> For her, the pressure exerted by the extrinsic nature of a Calvinist understanding of salvation creates a dualism at a personal and national level. For Calvinists, argues Milbank, redemption is based solely on imputed righteousness and may not be mediated through nature, good works or the presence of the divine in sanctification. Election alone is a guarantee of salvation, and assurance of election may come after a character admits his or her total depravity and inner struggle to live a life of righteousness, and their need for God. Hogg’s Robert Wringhim is driven to take these views to their extreme because he is given an assurance of his election before he has undergone a process of reflection and come to accept his need for God to resolve the warring states within himself. Stevenson’s Jekyll tries to circumvent the need for repentance to resolve his inner duality by splitting his psyche, which leads to his destruction as clearly as Robert Wringhim’s encounter with Calvinism leads to his. Milbank notes that this same duality is explored in *The Fanatic* in Carlin’s raging against the doubling so endemic in “oor haill fuckin culture,” which he then ironically undermines by addressing his image in the mirror (*Fanatic*, 25). Both Carlin’s attempt to escape the complexities of Scottish history and culture which have shaped him, and the prospect of nationalism as a “hope of unitary identity for Scotland, which will put to rest the warring dualities of its past” are suggested by Milbank as fantasies which cannot be escaped (Milbank, 89). However, she argues that both *The Fanatic* and *Gideon Mack* offer a more productive way to acknowledge this plurality

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<sup>3</sup> Alison Milbank, “Calvinist and Covenanter Gothic,” in *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 89-101.

in the self and in the nation, based on a way through rather than an entrapment within the past of Calvinism.

In *Gideon Mack*, Milbank suggests, opportunities for mediation between God and humanity, the past and the present, are presented to Gideon in various guises, all of which rework the extremities of a Calvinist understanding of salvation. Nature is offered as a possible place of religious integration, ironically highlighted by the figure whom Gideon assumes is the devil. This figure places a standing stone in the forest which introduces the presence of the supernatural into Gideon's existence, on which are imprinted a combination of pagan and Christian symbols. Milbank argues that the same figure helps Gideon to see that "secular modernity is locked into dualist modes of thought as deadly as Calvinism" (*ibid.*), creating, in the devil's view, "miserable people, ...fatalism, ...negativity,...the violence that's always just below the surface" (*Gideon Mack*, 283, quoted in Milbank, 100). He is also instrumental in presenting Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth* to both Gideon and his father before him.

For Milbank, Kirk may be read positively as a "mediating presence between Christianity and the fairy world" (Milbank, 100). The scene which closes the novel imitates the episode on Arthur's Seat in Hogg's *Confessions*, the salvific significance of which Robert Wringhim fails to grasp. In Robertson's reworking of the scene, the journalist who looks into the watery mist sees a man fall and senses it is a part of himself going to his death. However, this "Gothic representation of self-division ... is not so much a death as an opening to the possibility of self-knowledge" (Milbank, 101).

Milbank reads Robertson's work in a way which takes seriously its situatedness in a contemporary Scottish Gothic tradition and its informed interaction with Scottish Calvinism. This leads her to a positive perspective on the possibility Robertson presents, in *Gideon Mack* at least, regarding an integration of religion, the self and the nation in the secular present. I and others have argued that the reader is left with a rather more bleak portrayal of religious truths in the novel, symbolised by the emptiness of Gideon's mother's response to her son's return from the Black Jaws.<sup>4</sup> However, Milbank's willingness to engage with religion as a key trope in the novel brings new insight.

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 6, "Prodigal Ministers in Fiction," in Alison Jack, *The Prodigal Son in English and American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 119-137.

Robert Morace also interacts with both the Gothic and religious themes in Robertson's work, although the influence of Gothic is the predominant interest. He argues that a preoccupation with the ways in which the past and present relate to each other, and with what is marginalised and repressed in that process, lies at the heart of much of Robertson's fiction. In *Gideon Mack*, a key question is what happens to the religious faith of the past in a present which is resolutely secular. For Morace, the Gothic exaggeration of the fictionality of the novel, in the pitting of "intertextual extravagance" against "calvinist austerity," hints at the possibility of something deeper "for a more sceptical age."<sup>5</sup> In *The Fanatic*, Morace finds significance in the ubiquity of "dwamming": "Scots dwam is English dreams uncanny other, suggesting trance rather than sleep and evoking the supernatural and communal where dream suggests... the psychological and individual" (Morace, 34). Many characters in the novel go into such states, and awake wondering what is real. Morace argues that as the past and present episodes gradually become less distinct in *The Fanatic*, there is a suggestion that the reader has been drawn into an extended dwam, only to awake in the final four chapters to the real yet transient world of a post-Tory Scotland.

Morace's argument is only tangentially interested in religious issues in *The Fanatic*, but his assessment of Robertson's *Joseph Knight* (2003) points to an aspect of Robertson's work which I suggest has religious significance and might be explored further. For Morace, "*Joseph Knight* ends on a characteristically Robertsonian note of penultimacy, of something glimpsed but not fully understood, and certainly not finished" (Morace, 24). The language echoes St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13.12, in which he asserts that "now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part but then shall I know even as I am known" (KJV). This contingency, this glimpsing of something unfinished, with a hope of future understanding, is a strong and as yet unexplored strand of the perspectives offered in *The Fanatic*, where the somewhat shadowy figure of John Lauder articulates and represents this hope, especially when he speaks directly rather than through his contested *Ane Secret Book*.

In *The Fanatic*, Lauder is introduced through a variety of shifting perspectives, first as the possible author of the manuscript MacDonald gives to Carlin, and then through his interactions with his deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Morace, "James Robertson and Contemporary Scottish Gothic," *Gothic Studies* 13.2 (2011): 22-36 (35).

establishment figure of a father-in-law, Sir Andrew Ramsay, and with his more radical cousin and lawyer John Eleis. In his reported speech, and in the excerpts from *Ane Secret Book*, he speaks Scots, but there are also sections of the book in which his thoughts are presented in English, identifying him with the omniscient narrator. He is presented as having a perspective which is broader and more compassionate than the religious, political and legal context in which he finds himself. He has travelled in France and come back with new insights: "Ye gang awa and see yer ain land frae a distance, and ye see it better."<sup>6</sup> He is aware of the shifting times and seeks out the truth from those who are able to tell it, before it is too late ("I need tae see the things that are becomin invisible"), putting himself in positions of some danger to do so (*Fanatic*, 74).

While Lauder seeks out the truth about Carlin's two fanatics through personal testimony, he also offers a perspective for the reader which places these individuals in the wider historical sweep of fanaticism against witchcraft in Scotland which Carlin ignores. His interrogation of those he seeks out in prisons of different sorts is based on unthreatening compassion, in contrast to the torture they (like those accused of witchcraft) have previously endured: Jean Weir remembers he tells her not to fear, his presence brings a momentary sense of peace, and he offers her an assurance that she will get to heaven, rather than demanding her repentance. Jean momentarily wonders if he is an "angel" (*Fanatic*, 243), and it could be argued that Lauder's presence in the novel has a mediating, even angelic, function which keeps alive the possibility of a better way of relating to God and humanity. As Lauder reflects on Mitchel's fate, he feels pity for him, and realises it is "the pity he inspired that dignified him": Lauder asserts that if he lost this pity, "he would lose some essential part of himself. He would himself become less human" (*Fanatic*, 284). Pity is also, of course, a divine attribute: God may show it (Isaiah 63.9) or withhold it (Ezekiel 5.11); Jesus is presented as showing similar compassion towards the sick, the hungry and the grieving (Matthew 9. 36; 20.34; Luke 7. 13). As a character, Lauder embodies and integrates qualities which the divine and the human share, and his narrative journey brings him closer to an understanding of God at the same time as it presents him as a rounded and trustworthy person.

Lauder's role in the novel is presented in a positive although refracted way, his resolute search for understanding contrasted with the corrupt and

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<sup>6</sup> James Robertson, *The Fanatic* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 73.



defensive ways of the judiciary and the fixed, divisive theologies of the clergy. But, in Morace's words, his acknowledgement of his incomplete understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the temporal gives his presence that "characteristically Robertsonian note of penultimacy, of something glimpsed but not fully understood, and certainly not finished" (Morace, 24). From his first appearance in the novel, Lauder asserts the belief of his time in "the world...and a world that moved through it, beneath it." He also predicts that there will be a time when people either forget the other world, or be taught to "avert their eyes from it; to shield themselves from it" (*Fanatic*, 74). Lauder intellectually yearns for "a reality in which the only world was the one you woke to," noting its simplicity and basis in reason. But he also fears "what would be born of such an arrogant assertion of the knowledge of men," so open to the manipulation and calculation of the powerful against the weak (*Fanatic*, 75). And he continues to wonder if the basis on which the Covenant was drawn, and the world in which a Devil continues to lurk, might not be the reality, and asks "Who then would be the wise and who the foolish?" (*ibid.*). At the end of the novel, Lauder realises he is unable to "let go of the idea" of God: he "needed some greater thing outside of himself in order to be able to understand the world, and himself in it" (*Fanatic*, 286). This acceptance of his need to believe is not the end of the story, however, and he records his "growing need to sum up, to explain, to record." His solution is to turn to write down that which he has experienced and heard, in order "to make sense of it all" (*ibid.*), and the result, the novel suggests, is the *Secret Book* which Carlin will later be presented with. The acknowledgement of incomplete understanding but the hope of knowing and being known inspires Lauder in the same way as it inspired St Paul and the omniscient narrator whom Morace would identify with Robertson himself.

Crawford Gribben had asserted the creative and disruptive power of words in the Reformation to influence the way people understood themselves and God. Some commentators on Robertson's work have suggested that the intertextuality of his novels, within the tradition of Scottish Gothic writing, might be read as offering a sense of the meaningful presence of the past which religion might have offered in earlier texts. I have suggested here that, in the character of Lauder, a significant claim is made for the possibility of divine presence which both guarantees meaning and morality, and inspires attempts to make sense of the material world through writing, however contested and incomplete that might be. Lauder's assertion of the truth behind his quest for

understanding, which leads indirectly to his *Ane Secret Book*, might also lie behind the writing of St Paul, the Reformers, and Robertson himself:

Ye ken this is true – we canna change the wey folk think, but we  
can search oot a better wey o thinkin for the future (*Fanatic*, 72).

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